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Written Opponent Testimony  
House Bill 253

Chairwoman Manning, Vice Chairman Dean, Ranking Member Lepore-Hagan, and members of the House Commerce and Labor Committee: I appreciate the opportunity to submit written testimony to share what House Bill 253 means to me, personally, but also to many veterans — particularly, combat veterans — who have returned from their military service with post-traumatic stress. For many of us, the question of whether to legalize these more powerful fireworks is a matter of quality of life.

I served in the United States Air Force for seven years and, more recently, was president of the Ohio State Association of County Veterans Service Officers, which represents veterans in all 88 counties. I'm currently doing similar work at the national level. Much of my life after my military service has been dedicated to the betterment of the lives of Ohio's veterans in Hancock County, across the state, and now across the country.

Like many of the veterans I serve, I've had to deal with post-traumatic stress after my military service. I've been fortunate to have the comfort and presence of Tyson, my first service dog, and now Stevie Rae, who's training to be my second service dog. You may be surprised to know that rates of post-traumatic stress range from 12% of Persian Gulf veterans to 15% of Vietnam veterans to as high as 20% among post-9/11 veterans, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. That equates to about **100,000 veterans in Ohio living every day with post-traumatic stress.**

Living with PTSD impacts my ability to interact with society the way I would like to due to irrational fears, unprovoked anxiety attacks, and deep depression that periodically leads to isolation. Having a service dog helps me navigate these symptoms and most of the others that I haven't mentioned. Part of my responsibility as a dog handler is to anticipate my dog's needs, much like a parent does when they raise children. I make sure that I have a way for her to drink water if we are going to be away from home and the office for extended periods of time; I ensure I know where there are doggy relief areas when we stay in hotels; and I always stay home on the Fourth of July and New Year's Eve because I know there will be fireworks. The more secure I can help the dog feel during unusual noises and ground vibrations, the better. If HB 253 were to pass, there would be no way for me to know when to prepare myself and my service dog for the noise.

Many of the opponents to HB 253 are concerned about the safety aspect of legalizing these fireworks. I'd like to speak to another aspect of it, which is the unpredictability. A recent Virginia Tech study noted: "Fireworks on nights other than the Fourth of July or New Year's

Eve might be nothing more than inconsiderate neighbors, but for veterans with PTSD, **the shock of noise and light may trigger a deeply-learned expectation of danger.**” For them, “unexpected surprising events — noise or otherwise — could be matter of life or death.”<sup>1</sup>

With the veteran suicide rate as high as it is, why would we want to allow this unnecessary law change? In my daily interaction with combat veterans it breaks my heart to watch them beat themselves up with the inner dialogue when they have panic attacks. That is exactly what fireworks at unexpected times would cause for combat veterans.

Hancock County puts on a large Armed Forces Day celebration every May. Unfortunately, a young veteran with PTSD who had recently moved to Findlay was *not* familiar with the tradition. The surprise of helicopters, weapons, and other explosions so traumatized him that it took him several days to recover. I fear this legislation will make stories like the young veteran’s more common — *too* common.

Veterans love this country and enjoy celebrating it as much as anyone, but as with all revelry, there is a point when it becomes unnecessarily reckless. The type of fireworks HB 253 would legalize are an unpredictable and unwelcome factor — they would be one more thing we have to contend with as we try to live a normal life after our military service. And while I can plan to be home or somewhere else when I know the city puts on a fireworks show, I can’t anticipate neighbors setting them off. I rely on my service dog as a constant comfort by my side, and if my dog is startled or on edge because of fireworks, or God forbid if she runs off, that is unhealthy for me, too.

I am not alone in my concern about this legislation. The AMVETS Department of Ohio, which has 32,000 members in the state, previously testified against legalizing consumer-grade fireworks. And the American Legion national executive committee passed Resolution No. 33 in 2006 which reads in part: “Departments and Posts [should] encourage children and their families to enjoy fireworks at public fireworks displays conducted by professionals, rather than purchase fireworks for home or private use.”

Chairwoman Manning, Vice Chairman Dean, Ranking Member Lepore-Hagan, and members of the House Commerce and Labor Committee, thank you for your attention to this important matter. I’m not a subject matter expert on fireworks or the business of selling them. What I do know, and what I’ve dedicated my life after military service to, is helping veterans. Whether to legalize fireworks may seem like an innocent question, but I fear it could be deeply impactful to many Ohioans who are just trying to live normal, productive lives. Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> “Scientists find heightened attention to surprise in veterans with PTSD,” Virginia Tech Carilion Research Institute, <https://vtnews.vt.edu/articles/2018/01/vtc-ptsdlearning.html>